Agency, autonomy and self-determination

Editorial

Agency, autonomy and self-determination: Questioning key concepts of childhood studies

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Abstract

Children's agency has become a popularised conceptual and practical concern, following the rise of the 'new' sociology of childhood and the wide-spread ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The promotion of children's agency captured adults' wish to recognise children in their own right, that children are social actors in their families, communities and societies, and that their participation rights need to be promoted. However, recent deliberations in childhood studies have encouraged a harder look at children's agency on practical and theoretical grounds. This special journal issue addresses this agenda in three ways: to consider theoretical resources for re-framing agency and children's agency and, in particular, to make it more empirically useful in research and practice; to consider underlying concepts (such as vulnerability and competence), and whether they limit or enhance children's agency; and to develop alternative concepts, namely autonomy and self-determination, which may better support recognition of children as social actors and their rights.

Keywords

Agency; children; childhood studies; autonomy; children's rights

Over the past two decades, there has been an explosion of interest in 'children as agents'. Article after article, and project after project, have sought to identify and promote children's agency (for comment, see James, 2010; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). This correlated with the academic growth of the 'new' sociology of childhood (which broadened out with ever-increasing interdisciplinary interest to 'childhood studies') and the promotion of children's rights through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both the political and research agendas came together, with adults wanting to acknowledge children in their own right, whose participation should be recognised and supported in decision-making, and whose 'voices' should be heard and not only spoken for by their parents or concerned professionals.

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In fact, the early and seminal writings in the 'new' sociology of childhood (e.g. writings by Allison James, Alan Prout, William Corsaro, Chris Jenks and more) rarely used, let alone defined, children's agency or children as agents. A few traces can be found, such as Mayall (2002) and James and James (2004). But there was little definition and scant conceptual discussion. In the core description of the paradigm in James and Prout (1990), the phrase 'children as social actors' features rather than conceptualises children as agents. Yet, the subsequent research and associated literature frequently asserted the term 'agency', with explicit intentions to recognise and promote children's agency. Often studies were in-depth and qualitative, with a predominance of ethnographic methods, which demonstrated the ways children were agents in their own lives, families and communities (James, 2010).

In recent years, a growing chorus of childhood studies' academics have encouraged a harder look at children's agency: to question its application as always being helpful to analysis and practice; and to scrutinise its theoretical content. In its application, children's agency is problematic in numerous ways. As laid out by Tisdall and Punch (2012), and others, those writing in the childhood studies field have tended to assume children's agency is innately and inevitably positive, thus making it problematic if in the particular circumstances children's agency seemed questionable. For example, what does the academic or practitioner do with the 'ambiguous agency' of children and young people (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Edmonds, this issue) or with children's agency that goes against social norms (e.g. 'child soldiers', 'child prostitutes', or 'working children')?

A celebration of children's agency can ignore how some children are highly circumscribed by their contexts or other circumstances, failing to perceive how children's agency is 'thinned' by such aspects rather than 'thickened' (Klocker, 2007). Agency can be used as if it were something that children possessed, rather than something that is relational and expressed in relationships. Thus a child can be presented as not having agency – and blamed, seen as vulnerable or ignored – or as having agency – which is usually viewed positively and reported by the research. Theoretically, this has led to a range of writings (e.g. see Esser et al., 2016; Spyrou, 2018), which suggest that children's agency needs to be considered relationally: bringing in materiality and non-human resources or affordances (Prout, 2005; Gallacher, 2015; Gallagher, this issue; Sultan and Andresen, this issue); perceiving children in context and in relationships with other people (Punch, 2016); and recognising the structures of intergenerational orders (Leonard, 2015). Wyness captures several of these ideas in his description of agency:

> Children as agents are immersed within the social world and thus embedded in relations within which they have a formative influence. The child agent is not only capable but also fully social. Agency cannot simply be equated with individual choice or individual autonomy (Valentine 2011), it needs to be viewed as a relational concept, an effect of complex shifting social arrangements. (Wyness, 2015: 13)

Wyness introduces the term 'autonomy', as intertwined but distinguishable from children's agency. According to Nunner-Winkler, autonomy can be distinguished from 'self-determination' and defined as follows: Self-determination is attributed to an independent, informed formation of opinion about important aspects of one's life.

Autonomy is the more demanding term insofar as it means a kind of self-rule in which orientation-providing norms must additionally come with a justification of their validity (Nunner-Winkler, 2008, 2017). These definitions arguably need expansion, as they are too cognitivist or rationalistic (cf. Honneth, 1995), but they show the normative core of the related concepts. This is pivotal for today's culture and 'orders of justification' (Weber, 1969; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Honneth, 2010), i.e. normative principles that legitimise society's basic structures such as generational or gender orders. Those who advocate 'self-determination' and 'autonomy' as key concepts for childhood studies rely on today's normative orders that, while being averse to external determination and heteronomous claims, are centred in the idea of personal self-rule and self-realisation.

Specifically the notion of autonomy is deeply rooted in the modern history of ideas, stemming back to Kant, and seems to be promising specifically to explain the normative agenda of childhood studies. It is already inextricably linked to children's rights and legal principles such as child welfare (Sutterlüty, 2017; Daly et al., this issue). Whereas the concept of agency is only implicitly normative or crypto-normative, autonomy itself denotes a normative principle. In addition to that, discourses on autonomy not only reflect on the social conditions that facilitate self-determined decision-making but also on the related preconditions in regard to self-knowledge and self-respect of the acting subject (Roessler, 2015). Applying these discourses to children could be helpful to overcome paternalism and other attitudes that render them intrinsically immature, dependent and powerless.

In this light, autonomy can be seen as the ideal conceptual candidate for addressing childhood studies' normative agenda: Who, if not the child himself or herself, should be allowed to determine his or her fate? Because there seems to be only one answer to this question it could be concluded that, given contemporary normative orders, autonomy should arguably become the new core concept of childhood studies rather than agency.

It is timely to consider what concepts, and concomitant theoretical heritages and possibilities, will best explain and support the recognition of children as social actors. This agenda has a normative base, in accepting that children are indeed social actors, and such an acceptance has implications for their recognition and participation within their families, communities, services and systems. The agenda has policy and practice implications, as all of these arenas still often struggle to respect children's dignity and recognise and promote their contributions.

This special issue of *Global Studies of Childhood* takes on this agenda. The issue draws on papers presented at a seminar organised in December 2017, by Sutterlüty and Tisdall, at the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. Following the intensive discussion over two days, key papers were revised for this journal and others invited to complement the analytical developments. Broadly, the special issue addresses children up to the age of 18, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The special issue explores one avenue, which considers whether the theoretical and practical possibilities of agency can be further investigated, challenged and reframed. Several articles undertake this, in different ways. Gallagher's article 'Rethinking children's agency: Power, assemblages, freedom and materiality' connects a critical

reconsideration of agency with wider questions about relations between children, materials and non-humans. He ends by offering a set of four principles to focus attention on what agency does and analytical resources to explore children's relations with other kinds of materials, forces and bodies. Edmonds uses empirical experiences from research in Africa, to critique how children's agency is used in development contexts, in her article 'Making children's "agency" visible: Towards the localisation of a concept in theory and practice'. She argues for new directions in research and practice, to consider agency in socio-cultural terms that help animate local concepts of agency.

Another avenue investigates underlying or associated concepts that drive or block children from expressing their agency and recognition as social actors. Moran-Ellis and Tisdall pick up one of those concepts, competence, for a critical consideration in their article titled 'The relevance of "competence" for enhancing or limiting children's participation: Unpicking conceptual confusion'. They identified 67 articles published in six childhood studies' journals over 10 years, where 'competence' and its variations appear in the abstract. Generally, they find a lack of definitional clarity, a range of uses made of the term, and the risk that such uses of competence undermine claims for children's participation. They recommend greater epistemological clarity in the field, if competence were to be an effective concept to promote children as social actors and their participation. Sultan and Andresen consider the relationships between vulnerability and agency, in their article '"A child on drugs": Conceptualising childhood experiences of agency and vulnerability'. Whereas drug use is generally only seen as shaped by and creating vulnerability, their article suggests it can also create new connections with certain environments and become a source of agency for child and adolescent drug users.

Rather than embracing the concept of vulnerability, Daly and colleagues argue against its application to disabled children, as dangerously limiting their access to information on sexual education. Instead, they argue for a relational concept of autonomy that recognises disabled children's rights to education and information and adult responsibilities to facilitate these, in their article titled 'Vulnerable subjects and autonomous actors: The right to sexuality education for disabled under-18s'. In the final article, Mühlbacher and Sutterlüty also argue for the concept of autonomy, to replace agency as a primarily descriptive concept with a limited normative potential. In their article 'The principle of child autonomy: A rationale for the normative agenda of childhood studies', they provide a fulsome critique of child agency and develop a social concept of child autonomy. While they support the normative aim of the agency concept, they argue that this aim is better retained and more fully expressed by the notion of autonomy.

Together, we suggest that the articles in this special issue intersect in provocative ways. For example some concepts are fundamentally questioned – such as agency and competency – with calls for either greater specification or abandoning them for others. Vulnerability is subject to attention, either as a concept to embrace (Gallagher; Sultan and Andresen) or as fundamentally limiting and unhelpful (Daly and colleagues). Autonomy is recast by two articles (Daly and colleagues; Mühlbacher and Sutterlüty), while Edmonds discounts its applicability in more relational cultures and instead advocates re-working agency from local vantage points. The articles have practical and policy implications, in questioning underlying assumptions, offering new lenses and challenging ways to recognize and promote children as social actors. Both individually and

collectively, the articles in this special journal issue stretch the underpinnings of childhood studies in theoretically productive ways – with the intention of providing both contributions to childhood studies as well as broader literatures not yet permeated by childhood considerations.

Acknowledgements

Kay Tisdall acknowledges a range of collaborative projects funded by the Big Lottery Fund, the British Academy, Economic and Social Research Council (R451265206, RES-189-25-0174, RES-451-26-0685) and Knowledge Exchange funds from the University of Edinburgh and the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, the European Research Council, the Foundation of Canadian Studies, the Leverhulme Trust, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The two editors also wish to thank Alexander Kern and Angelika Boese for their valuable support in the editing process.

Funding

The international seminar was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, in the context of the research association 'Types of Negotiation on Normative Paradoxes' located at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The editors and authors of this issue are grateful to the Volkswagen Foundation for its generous support.

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